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SOCIAL NETWORKS

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THE SOCIAL NETWORK OF A HUNGARIAN PEASANT FARM

In my lecture I am trying to outline the social environment and social network of a small-holder peasant family throughout its history, that is, from 1920s to the 50s. This period is at such a distance from us in terms of time, that both the human memory and written documents can be used to reconstruct it; moreover, the fact that throughout these decades quiet and eventful periods alternated in the history of the Carpathian Basin makes possible for us to have an insight into the changes within the social network as well.

Every attempt at a comprehensive, thorough, both intensive and extensive analysis of the complete social network of either a single person or a family seems to be illusory, either considering it as part of the past or a sort of extended present. The fact that human relations are quite varied, with ever changing levels, intensity, and significance is in itself an explanation for this, not to speak about the conscious or unconscious distortions of human memory, and the differences of the ability referred to as verbalization. However, it does not mean that every such attempt must be automatically abandoned, since there are quite a few cases when the researcher is able to uncover the network of these relationships successfully, and the details still remaining obscure may raise new questions to be answered by more sophisticated methods.

For the analysis of any kind of social network a combination of three data collecting techniques seems to be the most efficient -that of questioning, observation and having things recorded, although each of them may lead to true conclusions by itself, provided that the method is sufficiently exhaustive. Such an opportunity presented itself when some years ago I got hold of a housekeeping-book that was kept for over forty years. It was its author who gave it to me as a present and who, on the several occasions when I was doing fieldwork in the following years, completed his past records with his verbal memories. The book he started in 1925 is in fact an account-book that contains receipts and expenses in connection with housekeeping and farming, including the daily outlay on cigarettes and groceries as well as the purchase of land and animals. Besides, he kept a record of family events, the jobs done for others or by others for him, the schooling of the children, holidays, crops, weather, political events and wartime memories of his youth. Naturally, this account-book, like most of the sort all over Europe, does not bear the exactitude of normal foundation of economic calculations, but rather for reminding his author of his expenditures, his short-term debts to be paid or worked off, and it also served as a practice of writing. Without going into details as to the circumstances and reasons of the beginnings of this

account-book it is worth mentioning that its keeping was quite voluntary, it lasted for a long time, and it contains hardly any real memoir-like notes reflecting personal thoughts or feelings. Meedless to say, its purpose was far from supplying a source material for a later analysis of the social relations of its author. But what makes then, in spite of all this, these approximately six hundred pages in four thick volumes appropriate for this latter purpose. Nothing else that most of the persons mentioned reappear in the notes with a certain regularity, and that the author commentated on his records later on. Although these commentaries could not be properly systematic owing to the advanced age of the author, and are not as detailed as his written records, they have the advantage over those, that they can help in the right interpretation of the data given. It is these commentaries that make these records more than a pile of dull facts, filling them with meaning; they are no longer simple events or chains of events but make up parts and details of a story, in fact a life-history. I am trying to illustrate the difference by an example. The author of the account-book, Sándor Nagy by name, used oxen as draught-animals in the 1920s and 30s. He changed them regularly, but never replaced them by horses. The first time he bought a horse was late as in 1948 when he was living in a new place, but even then he kept it only for a short time. If it were all to be known, on the basis of the account-book, it could have never been learnt that his main ambition was motivated just by the lack of a horse-carriage. Sándor Nagy always wanted to buy horses and to be a horsed farmer, since it would have meant better prospects and higher reputation for him in the village. It is obvious, that besides real events, in a sense the opportunities that failed to realize and the wishes not fulfilled also constitute parts of a life-history, and it is just these aspects that verbal remembrances help to disclose.

It is also his memories that throw light upon the turning points of his life that completely changed the network of his social relations. The first 5 decades of his long life Sándor Nagy was spending in two villages in the north of Hungary, on the boundary of Hungarian and Slovakian language areas. (After 1920 both villages were joined to Czechoslovakia.) As a child he was living through the first decade of the cenury in Ipolyfödémes, an isolated little village of poor natural conditions. At that time living in extended families was quite common in this region, i.e. more generations or brothers or sisters with their families; thus this high degree of endogamy resulted in the fact, that most people in the village were tied together by closer or looser family bonds. In his native village stories based on historical traditions were kept alive and spread by word of mouth, so the heroes of past centuries were like old personal acquaintances for Sándor Nagy. However, this small isolated, traditionbound village did not provide enough possibilities for earning one's living - many villagers engaged themselves for seasonal work at the surrounding large estates or moved to the capital in the hope of finding a job there. Sándor Nagy himself tried both ways as a young man, but what really changed his life to a degree unexpected even for himself was the First World War. At the age of 19 he was enlisted; after a short

while he was taken to the Russian front where he was soon taken prisoner of war, and got to a Caucasian village where he became a farmhand. He mastered the Russian language in a short time, and still as a prisoner of war, but being relatively free, he kept his eyes open observing everything around him. Thus he got know new peoples, mentalities and stories - the tales of the Russian soldiers who came home from the Persian-Turkish war of Mount Elbrus revivified for him parts of the Bible. On returning to Hungary in the winter of 1918 he could not find peace either -he saw the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and as a member of the Red Army he took part in the efforts at retaining the old boundary lines of Hungary. He took an active part in the fights against the Czechoslovaks defending his country, and having been defeated he was taken to prison for a few months. Within a year after getting home again he got married - his wife became the younger sister of the husband of one of his cousins, who had married a man from a neighbouring, bigger village. Thus his wife got into the original extended family of Sándor Nagy very soon, in the autumn of 1920. Five years later he moved to the neighbouring village, Ipolynyék together with his wife and three sons into home of his widowed father-in-law and rebuilt his house that had burnt down. With this he commenced the twenty-year-period of his life when he had to establish and develop his own life, and find his proper place in the society of Ipolynyék (Vinica). This village was almost three times bigger than his native one; it was situated in a more central position, and its society was more varied in terms of social strata including day-labourers, local landowners, craftsmen and tradesmen as well. To become an acknowledged member of the local community Sándor Nagy had to be a good farmer in the first place, and he tried to take advantage of the better local conditions accordingly. Since he had run severely in debt, he regularly went to the market and sold everything that he could. As compared with the size of his land he had plenty of draught animals, so he was able to plough and transport things for the poorer "zsellér"-s (cotters) in the village in exchange for their work to be done on foot; at the same time he also needed the help of horse-owning farmers when he wanted to go to the market to sell or buy things.

Son-in-laws lived in a traditionally rather inferior position within peasant families at that time - normally it was their father-in-laws who disposed of their incomes and working capacity. In this respect Sándor Nagy was in a better position from the beginning, as in return for rebuilding it he got the house of his father-in-law. However, in the esteem of the villagers he still had to make up for the disadvantages of his original position. That he managed to do it is reflected by the fact that in the mid-thirties he became the leader of the local book-club, then a member of the local board, and he was spoken of in the village with great respect even decades after his moving away.

The next turning-point in his life can be considered 1938, when the region in question was reannexed to Hungary under the terms of the first Vienna Award. Sándor Nagy at that time had already four nearly grown-up sons, and having renewed the relationship

with distant relatives living in Budapest, one of them went to secondary grammar school, and another to university in the capital, respectively. Soon after the war, in 1947 threatened by outlawry and deportation, Sándor Nagy and his family fled to Hungary leaving behind all his possessions. He settled down in Mór, in the Dinántul region (Transdanubia), a village inhabited by Germans for the most part, which has completely changed his social environment once again. He had neither relatives nor acquaintances here, had to learn the names of new düló -s (a large unit of fields several of which make up the lands of one parish) and also had to overcome the hostile feelings of the local people. His farming equipment and movables were smuggled through the border by his sons; he was put up in the home of a local German farmer appointed for being deported, and he was adjudged to the land confiscated from the same farmer as well. The following ten years, owning to the strong political pressure over the peasantry was not a suitable period for Sándor Nagy for his economic recovery. Naturally, it was the people resettled like him, with whom he entered into relations at first, and it was only in cases of need that he turned to local people. He eventually established his position and good reputation here, instead of his qualities as a farmer, by becoming a member of the local body of the church representatives and a devoted church-goer and regularly took part in all the parish-feasts of the neighbouring villages. By that time his sons have become independent - two of them migrated to Australia, and the other two chose to stay in Mór. The long years of his old age Sándor Nagy was spending in a state of growing isolation.

In the first twenty years of his life Sándor Nagy was fundamentally a member of a family - his relations were determined by family ties and the relationships with the neighbours. His parents had six children out of which only three stayed alive. Sándor Nagy was still a child when his elder brother and elder sister got married, and he was a young man when their children started to grow up. His grandparents, as well as his father's brother and his children formed the closer family circle all living together. It seems to be quite probable, that if Sándor Nagy had stayed in his native village, his more distant relatives, such as his second and third cousins, would have played a much greater part in both his records and memories. A part of these family relations were revived when after his resettlement in 1947 he had to start his life all over again. From this time on he and his more distant relatives living in other villages regularly visited and wrote to each other. In his remembrances of his family Sándor Nagy mentioned approximately 40 members of his distant and close relatives from his great-grandparents to the children of his cousin. However, only 15 of them were recorded in the book with their dates of birth, death and marriage. After moving to Ipolynyék the connections between Sándor Nagy and his relatives staying in Ipolyfödémes got looser. His father and brother came round to help him with restoring, his house vice versa, but they were doing everyday work separately. Besides, there were two special occasions a year when he invited his relatives of Ipolyfödémes or visited them at their homes - the day of the fiesta and that of Saint Stephen, his brother's

nameday. He also visited his parent's grave around All Soul's Day every year and had a mass celebrated for them as well. When his brother died in 1968, Sándor Nagy inherited his parent's prayer book dating back to the 19th century.

When he moved to Ipolynyék he got into closer connection with another family circle - that of his wife. He was living together with his father-in-law for 21 years, so their relationship became almost just as close as it was with his own parents. As an old man his father-in-law was still doing some minor jobs round the house and sometimes even worked by the day, but his wage was pooled into the family resouces. Besides, Sándor Nagy was on close terms with his wife's two brothers and their families. Apart from them he never mentioned any distant relatives of this family either in his records or memories, unlike regarding those of his own relatives living in his native village. However, his connections with the families of his two brothers-in-law were quite close. Since their pieces of land bordered each other, they were often doing major jobs (e.g. harvesting and gathering the crops) together. When in 1930 his wife's elder brother left for France with his wife and three sons for a few years to work there, Sándor Nagy took his pieces of land on a lease, thus doubling his farmland. As his children were getting older he needed it and also had the possibility to do it, besides he could manage to use his draught capacity for the cultivation of the approximately 15 "hold" of land (about 15 acres) he now disposed of. With the money his brother-in-law sent home he bought new pieces of land for him, that he himself cultivated until his brother-in-law returned home. His wife's second brother, who was younger tha the other, died in 1939, leaving six orphans behind. One of his daughters was adopted by Sándor Nagy and his family. They were also the god-parents of his brother-in-law children, although otherwise it was not customary in the village to select god-parents from among family members. Both of his brothers-in-law died suddenly, and the cases like these were remembered quite distinctly, and mentioned quite often by Sándor Nagy. (It also applies to the deaths of other relatives and villagers as well). Decades later the then grown-up children of his brothers-in-laws were present in almost full number at the funerals of Sándor Nagy and his wife.

The villagers who were not in any kind of kinship with Sándor Nagy can be classified in terms of his book on the basis of their relations to his household. In the period between 1925 and 1947 in the society of Ipolynyék Sándor Nagy is no longer a simple member of a family, but the head of his family, and it is his decisions and choices that determine the network of relations of the members of his family. This is the point when the first problem, coming from the common characteristics of the majority of the similar diaries and account-books is raised - namely that these records reflect a fundamentally masculine point of view, and that the people regularly mentioned in them are men. In spite of all this, we do not suppose that Sándor's wife, also being a member of the same society, did not have a similarly wide range of relationships in the village, although this aspect remains obscure both in the records and Sándor

Nagy's memories. We have similarly insufficient information as to the schoolmates, friends, etc. of his children. The majority of the persons mentioned in the records are people whom Sándor Nagy exchanged goods with in some way or other. They are neighbours, horse-owning farmers, "zsellér"-s (cotters: poor people not having yokes and owning only a small piece of land); landowners and leaseholders who employed farmhands and sometimes sold a piece of land or two; craftsmen and tradesmen, some intellectuals (like priests, teachers, veterinarians), shepherds, itinerant artisans and peddlers, and others who cannot be classified into any of the above categories for lack of information. Out of the approximately 150 persons mentioned from among the inhabitants of Ipolynyék about 20 percent belong to the latter group; it seems to be conspicuous enough, that there are hardly any among the people mentioned who would be the members of the same social stratum as Sánodr Nagy himself.

In the course of my interviews with him I tried to obtain information as to the identity of the persons mentioned, but unfortunately my efforts brought rather uneven results. One of the reasons for this was the use of nicknames, and the other that he could only remember fragments or episodes in connection with them. Thus we have estimable information as to only half of the persons mentioned on the basis of his remembrances, and even only a part of these can throw light on the nature of the relationship. All this increased the significance of my fieldwork on the spot, where his neighbours, relatives an acquaintances could complete the memories of Sándor Nagy in a great member of ceases. However, it raised other problems as well. In the best possible case I got to know in the course of my inquiries who the person had been, when he had lived, which category he belonged to, but as to the nature of his relationship with Sándor Nagy I could not get, quite naturally, any sort of information.- It is obvious, that when C tells anything about the relationship between A and B, if he can tell anything at all, what he says is incvitably distorted by the relationships of C with A and B. It was also my fieldwork that convinced me that there was little hope of a completes reconstruction of the whole network of Sándor Nagy's social relations, since there were many people not even mentioned either in the records or in his remembrances, who were talking about him. This is again a quite natural phenomenon, since obviously there were dozens of people he met day by day in the street, in the shops or in the fields; he was talking with them every Sunday after mass outside the church, he even lent them some money or some tools and still all this might well be missing from his account-book and sink into oblivion, especially hundreds of kilometers away. At the same time, there are persons mentioned in his records or remembrances in connection with a special event or sudden death, whom he had hardly known.

Now we could give a detailed analysis of the goods he exchanged with the persons belonging to the different social strata, when he exchanged them, how he paid for them (in cash or in kind), etc. Naturally, we will not do this for two reasons. On the one hand because it could not be possibly told in the course of a lecture, and on the other, because our purpose is not to analyse

an economic system but the network of social relations. Therefore we should concentrate on the process by which Sándor Nagy tried to establish and retain his reputation in the village. It has already been mentioned, that in the first few years after his getting to Ipolynyék, that is, between 1925 and 1930, he used his relatively high draught capacity for ploughing and transporting things for poorer smallholders in the village. In his later remembrances this sort of relationship looks as if it were characteristic of the whole of this period, as if there were dozens of people waiting for the occasions when they could repay him his help by jobs done on foot. However, the information given by the account-book contradict this interpretation of the facts. According to his records from 1930 on, when he took some land on lease, these sorts of jobs done for others or done by others for him lessened to a great extent both in the number of occasions and the dimensions of jobs. This contradiction is significant from our point of view as a reflection of his self-respect. Anyway, most of the persons mentioned by their names in the records, about one third of them, belong to the social stratum of "zsellér"-s (even if their relationship was not a constant one in each case). Horse-owning farmerswere important for Sándor Nagy in two respects - they gave him the possibility of transporting goods, and served as models to be followed. In most of the cases he paid them in cash; their rate in his relationships is 10 percent. Landowners and intellectuals were important for Sándor Nagy also in terms of increasing his self-respect. They meant high society for him; the intellectuals because they gave books and newspapers for him to read, which he evaluated highly as an open-minded man from the peasant class, and the landowners because they acquainted him with some innovations (e.g. the growing of seeds of fodder plants) by which he could make more money. His relations with traders meant much to him as an important factor in buying things on credit, and a possibility to sell his surplus products in the village in case he would not be able to sell them at the market. Their proportion in the network of his social relations was again about 10 percent. The relations of Sándor Nagy with craftsmen were always adjusted to the needs of his household and peasant farm, therefore they were fluctuating both in terms of proportions and dimensions. For instance, between 1926 and 1936 from among the jobs done for him the rate of those performed by craftsmen fluctuated between 10 and 90 percent. Still it is the category of craftsmen with a rate of 25 percent that is the second largest after that of the "zsellér"-s, as far as it is known, as to their relations with Sándor Nagy. His relationship with itinerant artisans and peddlers coming from the Slovakian language area is very special - he put them up regularly and in exchange they paid his bill in the pub and started from his house day after day to carry out their orders. All this ensured a central position for him in a way, though it is not quite certain that a local farmer just by serving as the host for the slightly despised wandering craftsmen and tradesmen should otherwise be entitled to such a position in the village. The wife of Sándor Nagy, besides doing the usual peasant jobs, supplied the family and the closer relatives with all the necessary clothes with her sewing machine, while her husband

could mend worn-out shoes.These activities made them somehow independent, too, and with the money thus saved also meant surplus receipts. In the 1940s the careers of his sons could also increase his good reputation in the village, since two of them went to university in Budapest.

His relations with public institutions like the Church, banks, the community, the courts of law or the state could also be worth mentioning; we could also analyses the changes in his trips to the markets or elsewhere in terms of time and place, etc. Finally I should like to point out on the basis of the example posed by the life history of Sándor Nagy, that there is a quite probable connection between his network of social relations, its existence and changes throughout his long life, and the choices of career and mobility of his sons and grandchildren. It is quite remarkable that Sándor Nagy established his relations very soon and with great intensity outside the traditional world of the peasant way of life he was grown up in, and that he also cherished this sort of relationships - through the landowners, intellectuals, last but not least books and perhaps writing itself - even when his main ambition was to find his place in the peasant society of a village. Another conspicuous fact is, that there was only one out of his four sons who, in spite of the transformation of historical circumstances and the elimination of peasantry as an independent social class, took his father's way of life as a model, and after working in industrial jobs for a while returned to agricultural work and founded a large family (not an extended family). As to his two sons who migrated to Australia we do not have any information, but his fourth child, his eldest son who settled down in Mór, being unable to do the work of peasants due to his crippled foot from the beginning became a lower-grade economic executive and a party functionary after getting two university degrees. As regards his eight grandchildren neither of them chose the peasant way of life or agricultural work as a career - all of them found their jobs in industry, services or the public health service after getting secondary education. Although it might be an exaggeration to explain all this with the network of social relations established by the grandfather, it seems to be quite obvious that it played a great part in the life of his sons and grandchildren in a direct or indirect way. To put it more generally I would say, that in the last period of the peasant way of life and mentality in Hungary it was just the characteristics of the social network that showed a way leading out of them.